

LAO CHICKEN LARB



Fresh produce including green vegetables (left) and crickets (right) for sale at a market in Luang Prabang, Laos.

PHOTOS: ROBYN HENDERSON

ABOUT THE DISH

Larb (also known as laab or laap) is a light meat salad typically served with rice and lettuce cups and is considered one of the national dishes of Laos. It has variations in northern Thailand. The word larb is believed to have different origins, including the Lao word 'lab' meaning 'fortune' and the ancient northern Thai verb meaning to 'chop finely'.

SUSTAINED FARMER ORGANISATIONS OF NORTHERN LAO PDR

Food safety in South-East Asia is a prominent issue, in particular the overuse of pesticides and other chemicals on fresh produce and vegetables. The improper use of pesticides is not only an issue for human health but can have long-lasting effects on the environment. Indeed, the word is out and the demand for organic production is ever-increasing.

A group of 30 female producers in the northern Lao province of Xieng grow and sell high-value organic vegetables. They sell twice a week in the provincial capital. Following their successes the group has formed an organic vegetable producers' association and is working with the Sustainable Agriculture and Environment Development Association (SAEDA) to spread the word further. However, the group needed support and guidance to develop a strategy.

Lao PDR has a well-established network of central, provincial and district extension units. A range of production models and extension

methods have been shown to be effective under donor-funded development. Local extension officers are yet to gain the vision and the management skills to identify and support similar opportunities beyond the life of these projects.

THE PROJECT

A James Cook University team has partnered with the Department of Agriculture Extension and Cooperatives (DAEC) in Laos to research and pilot ways of strengthening extension. Participatory action research methodologies are being used to engage stakeholders from villages, districts, provinces and relevant government agencies in the co-creation and implementation of guidelines for comprehensive extension including: supporting farmer organisations, facilitating farmers' market engagement, and extension management systems (EMS) tools for the planning and management of services.

Working with the Laos District Agricultural and Forestry Office (DAFO) the James Cook team carried out several studies with potential new members and the association leadership to identify appropriate methods of coaching new producers to ensure the standards of organic production are being met.

This project is also working with several other organisations across a range of products—commercial rice, coffee, organic vegetables and poultry—using the EMS tools and based on the number of households that stand to benefit. After

three years of extension (ending in 2015), a total of 1,631 households are engaged in new forms of production. For a cumulative cost of extension delivery equalling \$60,000, household income for 2015 was \$300,000.

Over the past decade the National Agricultural and Forestry Extension Services (NAFES) has developed a demand-driven extension process, the Lao Extension Approach (LEA). This process helps farmers to identify opportunities and needs, and assists them with training in the use of improved technologies to support their revised aims. ■

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Enhancing district delivery and management of agriculture extension in Lao PDR.

MORE INFORMATION

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Lao Chicken Larb

Ingredients

2 whole boneless chicken breasts
(or 1.3 kg of chicken mince)
Juice of 2 large limes, plus 1 lime for garnish
2 tbsp rice wine
2 tsp minced fresh ginger
1 stalk minced lemongrass (remove tough
outer leaves, root and top several inches
before mincing)
3 tsp grated lemon peel
2 small hot chillies, minced, or 1 tsp crushed
chilli flakes
1 clove garlic, minced
1 tbsp fish sauce
1-½ tsp salt
½ tsp white pepper
3 tbsp toasted sticky rice flour
1 tsp chicken stock powder
1 heaped cup chopped fresh mint
1 heaped cup chopped coriander
1 bunch green onions, peeled
and sliced diagonally
½ cup chopped Thai basil
16 large lettuce leaves, for wrappers
several additional stems of mint
and coriander, for garnish

Method

1. Chop the chicken with a heavy knife or cleaver. As you chop the chicken, fold it over on itself. Continue to fold and chop until the meat is very finely chopped.
2. Put the meat in a large bowl and squeeze lime juice over it. Add rice wine.
3. Cook chicken mixture in a non-stick frying pan (don't use oil) over medium-high heat, tossing and stirring constantly until meat turns white.
4. Return mixture with any accumulated juice to the bowl and allow to cool to room temperature. While chicken cools, prepare fresh herbs. Add the ginger (or galangal), lemongrass, lemon peel, chilli peppers (or crushed chilli flakes), garlic, fish sauce, salt, white pepper and rice flour to the cooled mixture.
5. Break apart the chicken stock cube and sprinkle it on top. Toss the ingredients together until they are well mixed. Then add the mint, coriander, green onions and Thai basil. Gently toss everything together.
6. Scoop ¼ a cup of larb on to each washed lettuce leaf and arrange the leaves on a large platter. Garnish with mint and coriander sprigs and wedges of lime. Serve with cool sticky rice. Serves 6

